

This afternoon at approximately (time), an EPA and State Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety team working to investigate and reduce metals contamination at the Gold King Mine in San Juan County, Colo. unexpectedly triggered a large release of mine waste water into the upper portions of Cement Creek. Initial estimates are that the release contained approximately 1M gallons of water that was held behind unconsolidated debris near an abandoned mine adit. There were several workers at the site at the time of the breach, all were unharmed.

The primary environmental concern is the pulse of contaminated water—containing high levels of metals, including iron, zinc and copper—flowing as an orange discharge downstream through Cement Creek and into the Animas River.

The State of Colorado has notified water users downstream of the release so they can take appropriate steps to turn off intakes until the contaminated water passes. The Town of Silverton does not take water out of the affected fork of Cement Creek. Due to current and longstanding water quality impairment associated with heavy metals in the Cement Creek watershed, there are no fish populations in the Cement Creek watershed and in the Animas River until several miles downstream of Silverton. Over the next several days, EPA teams will be sampling and investigating impacts downstream to confirm that the release has passed and poses no additional concerns for aquatic life or downstream water users. EPA will also be addressing damage in the immediate vicinity of the release, including impacts to nearby access roads.

“This incident, while unfortunate, underscores the very reason EPA and the State of Colorado are focused on addressing the environmental risks at abandoned mine sites,” said David Ostrander, director of EPA’s emergency response program in Denver. “Obviously our initial concern is the safety of the personnel working on this project and we are thankful that all are unharmed. EPA will be assessing downstream conditions to ensure any impacts and concerns are addressed, as necessary.”